SEMANTICS

Introduction to English Linguistics

Semantics

Semantics is concerned with meaning.

One reoccurring theme in studying about language.

Morphology   (Internal structure of English words)

Syntax   (Structure of phrases and sentences)

Pragmatics   (Intended meaning)

Semantics

Denotation meaning   &   Connotation meaning

(Literal meaning)   (Underlying meaning)

○ **Denotation** is the literal meaning of a word that can be found in a dictionary.

○ **Connotation** is the feeling or idea that goes along with a word.

For example, pig simply denotes a specific animal, but the connotation of the term is often negative and it can be used in a figurative way, for example, to describe a person.

Cheap (negative connotation) - Inexpensive

Denotation and Connotation

Below are groups of similar words used to describe people. What are the connotations of each word?

1. Childlike, Youthful, Childish, Young

2. Disabled, Crippled, Handicapped

3. Relaxed, Laid-back, Easygoing

4. Slim, Skinny, Slender, Thin

5. Cheap, Economical

6. Adolescent, Immature, Juvenile, Innocent

7. Inquisitive, Interested, Curious, Prying

8. Confident, Proud, Egotistical

9. Talkative, Conversational, Chatty, Jabbering

Componential Analysis

Semanticists engaged in componential analysis (sometimes referred to as lexical decomposition) attempt to define words in terms of a set of abstract semantic primitives that break down a word into its essential components.

Componential Analysis of Meaning

◦For instance, Leech (1981: 90) proposes the features below to define the words *man*, *woman*, *boy*, and *girl*:

Man: _human, _adult, _male

Woman: _human, _adult, _female

Boy: _human, _young, _male

Girl: _human, _young, _female

Semantic Features

- **Motion**: bring, fall, walk, run
- **Contact**: hit, kick, kiss
- **Creation**: build, imagine, make
- **Sense:** hear, see, feel

Semantic relations

More traditionally, semanticists have compared words in terms of a group of more general semantic relations that describe various degrees of similarities and differences that words exhibit. In her survey of the literature on semantic relations, Sparck Jones (1986: 42–7) identifies 12 different relations that have been proposed, including the three below:

◦ **Synonymy:** words having the same meaning

   (e.g. *help/assist, common/ ubiquitous, hard/difficult*)

◦ **Antonym:** words having opposite meanings

   (e.g. *light/dark, heavy/light, open/closed*)

◦ **Hyponymy:** words whose meanings are included in the meaning of a more general word

   (e.g. *daisy, rose, tulip → flowers; desk, table, sofa → furniture; sparrow, robin, crow → birds*)

Synonyms

The true test of synonymy is substitutability: the ability of two words to be substituted for one another without a change in meaning. For instance, the example below contains the verb *assist*.

The research assistant was available to **assist** patients completing the survey.

If *help* is a synonym of *assist*, then it should be able to be substituted for *assist* in the above example without a change in meaning:

Synonyms

However, absolute synonymy is a controversial notion.

    1. He finds it **difficult [hard]** to describe his feelings.

               (BNC A06 838)

 2. I do not deal with the equally **hard [difficult]** problem of the patient who is admitted unconscious to hospital after a suicide attempt

               (BNC ASK 1523)

3. Charles also found himself in a **difficult [?hard]** position.

               (BNC AOF 140)

Synonyms

Other differences are more subtle, as in the case of *buy* and *purchase*. There are certainly cases where the two words can be interchanged. However, forms of the two verbs occur in very different contexts.

1. The family **bought [purchased]** a house in Park Street, London, and another converted Tudor farmhouse near Esher.

(ICE-GB W2F-017 082)

2. Sangster recently **purchased [bought]** a 10-acre property in the South of France, apparently to concentrate on his golf.

(BNC A4B 342)

Synonyms

3. Can I **buy [?purchase]** you a cognac?

(BNC CEC 829)

4. The serving machines are available in a selection of sizes and can be leased or **purchased [?bought]**.

(BNC A0C 1147)

Another clear example: "**House**" and "**Home**"

Antonyms

While synonyms have similar meanings, antonyms have opposite meanings. For Lyons (1977: 279) and Murphy (2003: 170), antonymy is a type of contrast.

Old ---- New

Expensive ----

Rural ----

Dark ---

Antonyms

Table 6.3. Examples of gradable antonyms

Separate words	Prefixing with *un–/in–/im–*
young/old	intelligent/unintelligent
hot/cold	decent/indecent
beautiful/ugly	attractive/unattractive
tall/short	likable/unlikable
fat/thin	comfortable/uncomfortable
heavy/light	probable/improbable
high/low	forgettable/unforgettable
wide/narrow	civilized/uncivilized
happy/sad	happy/unhappy

Antonyms

In their analysis of word pairs marked as antonyms in the *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (4th edn.), Paradis and Willners (2006) found that while the majority of antonyms were **adjectives** (59%), other form classes were represented as well: nouns (19%), verbs (13%), and other (9%).

Antonyms

Adjectives: *active/passive, bad/good, illegal/legal, long/short, feminine/ masculine, rural/urban, gay/straight*

Nouns: *advantage/disadvantage, boom/recession, guilt/innocence, optimism/ pessimism*

Verbs: *agree/disagree, confirm/deny, disprove/prove, fail/succeed, lose/win*

Adverbs: *directly/indirectly, explicitly/implicitly, officially/unofficially, quickly/slowly*

Hyponyms

Hyponymy is a relation in which the meaning of a word is included in the meaning of a more general word.

   poodle is a hyponym of *dog* because the meaning of *poodle* is included within the more general meaning of *dog*. In the relation of hyponymy, the more specific word is known as a **hyponym** and the more general word a **hypernym** (Meyer, 2009).

   Navy blue ----- Color

   Fry ----- Cook

   Justin ----- singer

Componential Analysis of Meaning

How this knowledge benefits you?

- John likes basketball.
- The table likes basketball.
- The dog ran across the field.
- The refrigerator ran across the field.
- Dana's mother has no children.
- The empty bucket is full.

How this knowledge benefits you?

Writing as an art

    Avoid repetition

1. Justin got drunk and had a fight with other passengers in the cruise. (He) _____ ended up paying fine of 500 Baht.

2. A 10 year-old boy, Sam, was kidnaped by a group of masked men. (He) _____ returned home safely this morning.

Conceptual Metaphor

Conceptual metaphor is a model that aims to explain how human cognition deals with certain aspects of meaning. A conceptual metaphor is an expression from ordinary language in which the meaning associated with **A** is drawn from **B**.

Conceptual Metaphor

Angry (Anger)

○You make my blood boil.

○Let her stew.

○She got all steamed up.

○He's just blowing off steam.

Hot (Heat)

Conceptual Metaphor

Time

◦She spends her time unwisely.

◦The diversion should buy him some time.

Something valuable

Summary

1. Componential Analysis

2. Semantic Relations

3. Conceptual Metaphor

References

Books:

- Chapter "Semantics" in Book "Introduction to English Language and Linguistics-Reader"

- Chapter "English words: Structure and Meaning" in Book "Introducing English Linguistics" by Meyer, C. (2009)